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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 005799

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SUBJECT: MOFAZ: CALM ALLOWS GOI TO HOLD OFF GAZA ACTION,
GROUND ASSAULT DISTANT LAST RESORT, DESPITE PREPARATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told Ambassador Jones September 25 that the day's calm, after some than 36 hours of Qassam rocket launches and IDF counterattacks, is allowing the GOI to stand back and avoid any further strikes on Palestinian targets. He said any possible ground force action would come only if Palestinian attacks continue over time and only when and if all other means of countering those attacks fail, but he indicated that the GOI clearly prefers a return to the pre-September 23 calm. He added, however, that Israel cannot accept attacks from Gaza even in response to its terrorist-hunting actions in the West Bank. Asked whether the Likud Central Committee will vote to hold early primaries, against the strong wishes of Prime Minister Sharon, Mofaz said he believe that the majority of Central Committee members will act rationally, and not vote for early primaries that would put their party out of office earlier than the elections scheduled for November 2006. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) In their introductory meeting September 25, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told the Ambassador that Israel seeks to preserve the calm that has existed since the abatement of Friday's and Saturday's Qassam rocket attacks. While Israel has launched counter-strikes and has forces prepared for further action, the GOI hopes that Hamas will stand down. Asked whether the weekend's violence would affect the Likud Central Committee vote on whether to hold early party primaries, Mofaz said that Israelis "understand and are not influenced by such things." He added that a ground forces assault on Gaza would be "the last step we'd take," and only if all "other measures don't work." He stressed that Israel retains capability to strike where it wants, and that its intelligence assets in Gaza remain strong, despite no longer having forces within the Gaza Strip. Only if casualties continue to mount over a period of time would leaders resort to a ground assault, he said. (NOTE: Army attache on site near Gaza at 1600 hours local September 25 reports some 40 APCs, 20 Merkava tanks, seven or eight D-9 bulldozers, and three laser designator teams, all indicating buildup to brigade-size force.)

3. (C) Mofaz described the Palestinian Authority as a one-man show, in which that man, President Abbas, wants to achieve the Palestinians' long-standing goals, but not by violence. Beneath Abbas in the chain of command, however, he faces a fractured team, with PA Prime Minister Qurei politically strong and against him, and Interior Minister Nasser Yusif weak and supporting him. Most loyal, he said, is Finance Minister Salam Fayyad, who enjoys excellent standing with Israel and the international community, but is weak within the PA.

4. (C) In addition, said Mofaz, the PA security forces are weak, not because of any lack of arms or means, but because of lack of motivation and courage to act against terror organizations. He cited Gaza NSF commander Suleiman Hillas as a single example of a strong commander, but termed most of the others "against each other." Abbas, he said, is a long way from achieving his Sharm El Sheikh agreement pledge of one authority, one gun. Mofaz said that when he met with Abbas about six months ago, Abbas told him the one thing he needed was time -- six months. Abbas clearly did not realize what he faced, Mofaz said. Abbas's policy is to contain the terror organizations because he feels that he is weak and cannot take stronger action. He doesn't have one man controlling all his security groups. Dahlan, he said, is strong, but wants the civil affairs portfolio for now because he wants to "serve his own future" and avoid conflict with Hamas and other groups. Dahlan and Yusif are like a dog and cat, Mofaz said, with Dahlan made strong by virtue of his status, loyal troops and money.

5. (C) Mofaz termed Hamas the strongest of the terror organizations and the organization that most clearly paints itself as the alternative to Abbas and the Palestinian authority. Despite Israeli targeted killings of its leaders over the past five years, the group "is still strong," and is using Israel's disengagement from Gaza to claim success for its efforts. Mofaz suggested that Hamas will now try to maintain the calm through the January PLC elections, building its support among the population. Whether Hamas decides on its own or under the influence of Abbas to avoid conflict, it will keep a low profile.

16. (C) Mofaz said he considers economic development key to strengthening Abbas and enabling him to succeed in Gaza post-disengagement. Mofaz said he is working with Quartet Special Envoy James Wolfensohn on passages and other means to improve commerce and travel. Wolfensohn, he said, has a good master plan, and has held several valuable trilateral talks. Key elements now are to improve the system of passages, change the policy in the passages to eventually move to door-to-door transport rather than back-to-back, and secure the outside support to the PA necessary to make it all happen. He cited Wolfensohn's plan for \$3 billion in assistance in each of the next three years, combined with private investment, as key to getting Palestinians to support Abbas.

17. (C) Mofaz briefly detailed the months of talks over the Rafah crossing, saying that he hopes to resume talks as soon as possible now that the Qassam launches appear to have stopped. He charged that after Israel withdrew from the Philadelphi corridor, "a tsunami of Palestinians," thousands of rifles, hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition, and a ton and a half of explosives came into Gaza. He pointed out that before the violence began on Friday, Israel had agreed to Egyptian requests that the Rafah passage be opened Friday for transit of students, and that was done. Even on Saturday, Israel agreed to allow 500 more people to cross, however, now the passage is closed, he said. The passage is now closed, he said. Asked whether construction of a new terminal on the Egyptian side of the crossing at Kerem Shalom could delay any prospective opening there, Mofaz said the Egyptians are planning to use their current terminal, at Rafah, to process travelers. Since buses are already used to transport travelers between the Egyptian and the Gaza terminals at Rafah, the Egyptians can simply process people in and out through their Rafah terminal and bus them the additional two kilometers to Kerem Shalom.

18. (C) Mofaz acknowledged that the weekend's cycle of violence began with Friday's IDF killing of three PIJ militants near Tulkarm in the West Bank, but said both Israel and the PA know that Israel was not responsible for the Friday explosion in Jabalya that killed 19, as Hamas claims. Mofaz asserted that Israel cannot accept that Hamas explosives kill Palestinians and then Israel pays the price. He said most Palestinians know that Israel has taken difficult steps by withdrawing from Gaza and parts of the West Bank. They also know and understand that Israel will continue to target Hamas and PIJ militants who try to kill Israelis, and that Israel will do it in a "very surgical way." He suggested that that understanding underlies the calm that has been maintained following the various strikes and counterstrikes. Mofaz stressed that the roadmap is the way ahead, but that Israel insists on Palestinian fulfillment of all its security obligations under phase one, while Abbas wants to move directly to phase three final status talks.

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JONES